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Extension Extra

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Family & Consumer
Sciences
Food Safety

COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE & BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES / SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY / USDA

Listeriosis

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What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a disease caused by a bacterium, *Listeria monocytogenes*, commonly called "*Listeria*." People most often get listeriosis by eating foods that are contaminated with *Listeria*. In nature, *Listeria* is commonly found in soil and water.

Listeriosis in healthy adults has flu-like symptoms such as fever and chills. Occasionally, an upset stomach will develop. People at risk— young, elderly, or those with weakened immune systems—may develop symptoms such as headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, or convulsions. Symptoms usually occur within 72 hours, although it may take up to 8 weeks for someone to become ill.

Listeria is an organism that is able to reproduce at refrigeration temperatures. This can be significant in certain ready-to-eat products that have a long shelf life and require refrigeration.

How does *Listeria* get into my food?

Animals can be carriers of the bacteria even though they show no clinical symptoms of the disease. *Listeria* bacteria live in the intestines, which makes the contamination of meat and dairy products possible.

The best way to keep *Listeria* out of food is by killing it in a cooking process or by other heating methods such as pasteurization. The *Listeria* problem often is associated with ready-to-eat foods contaminated after processing in a manufacturing plant.

Ready-to-eat foods of concern include hot dogs, luncheon meats, cold cuts, fermented or dry sausage, and other deli-style meat and poultry. Outbreaks have also been connected to unpasteurized dairy products.

Who is most likely to develop listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a disease that may cause few or no symptoms in healthy people. Those at high risk to develop listeriosis include pregnant women, newborns, elderly, and people with weakened immune systems caused by cancer treatments, AIDS, diabetes, and kidney disease. People in this high risk group may become seriously ill if they eat foods that contain *Listeria*.

Pregnant women may experience very mild symptoms, but the mother's illness can be transmitted to the fetus through the placenta. This can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, or serious health problems for the newborn child.

If you are at risk and/or have symptoms that concern you, consult your health care provider. Listeriosis is successfully treated with antibiotics.

What can I do to prevent listeriosis?

Consumers who are in the **high risk group** should follow these food safety practices to prevent listeriosis and other foodborne illnesses:

- Reheat ready-to-eat foods until they are steaming hot. This includes hot dogs, luncheon meats, cold cuts, fermented and dry sausage, and other deli-style meat and poultry product. If you do not reheat them, do not eat them.
- Consume only pasteurized milk and dairy products made from pasteurized milk.
- Do not eat soft cheeses such as feta, Brie, Camembert or blue-veined varieties.

All consumers are reminded to follow the following food safety practices to reduce their risk of foodborne illness:

- **Clean.** Wash hands, surfaces, utensils, cutting boards, and dishes with hot, soapy water. *Listeria* can grow slowly at refrigeration temperatures; therefore, use hot, soapy water to clean up spills in the refrigerator.
- **Cook.** Cook foods to safe temperatures. Contact your county Extension office for USDA recommended cooking temperatures.
- **Chill.** Refrigerate or freeze perishables, including ready-to-eat foods and leftovers. Do not leave these foods in the temperature danger zone (40 to 140 degrees F) for more than 2 hours. Keep refrigeration temperatures at 35 to 40 degrees F. Leftovers should be used within 1 to 3 days and reheated to a safe temperature of 165 degrees F.
- **Separate.** Don't cross-contaminate. Ready-to-eat foods and raw meat, poultry, and sea-food can contain dangerous bacteria. Keep these foods separate from vegetables, fruits, breads, and other foods already prepared for eating.
- If you have a food item that is recalled by the federal government or processor because of *Listeria* or other bacterial contamination, do not eat it. Return the recalled food to the place where you purchased it.

For more information
regarding listeriosis and other foodborne illnesses
contact the following:

Your SDSU County Extension Office.

USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline:
1-800-535-4555

Food Safety and Inspection Service:
<http://www.fsis.usda.gov>

Centers for Disease Control:
<http://www.cdc.gov>

SDSU Food Safety Homepage:
<http://www.abs.sdstate.edu/flcs>

National Food Safety Database:
<http://www.foodsafety.org>

Food and Drug Administration:
<http://www.fda.gov>

Gateway to Government Food Safety Information:
<http://www.foodsafety.gov>

Information compiled from the USDA/FSIS consumer publication, "Listeria Monocytogenes and Listeriosis."



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